Interview with James Maddox, Vietnam hospital corpsman, interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 9, 23 June 1999.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in northern California near San Francisco, a place called San Mateo.

Did you go to school there?

No. Actually, I went... My dad was in the Navy. He was a corpsman. He was more of a ship corpsman. He never went with the Marines. So I grew up a couple of years here, a couple of years there. I lived over in Guam and in Hayward, California. By the time I was 12 years old we were living in Marin County which is in northern California above San Francisco. That's where I was living when I joined the Navy.

When did you join?

I joined in '66. I was born in December of '46 and I joined in June of '66 so I was 19. Not that I was really wanting to go in the Navy or anything. It was, of course, the time the draft was kicking in. I had gotten a draft notice and went for a physical and ended up being 1-A so I wanted... I tried to get into the National Guard, Air Force Reserve, and things like that but they were all closed up then. The next best thing was a Navy Reserve program where you joined the Navy and went to boot camp and then you didn't report for active duty for basically a year. Then you did 2 years of active duty and some reserve time afterwards. In June of '66 I joined and I think I went to boot camp the end of that month. I got out of boot camp about August of '66 and then didn't go on active duty again until June of '67.

Had you decided you wanted to be a corpsman or had they...?

No. It was in the back of my mind because my dad had been one. It kind of intrigued me as a young guy for some reason. I did think I wanted to be a veterinarian or a doctor or something medical. But I didn't have the idea of actually being a corpsman when I went in the Navy. I took a bunch of aptitude tests. I think my highest aptitude was in clerical. I wish I had gone toward that direction--been a yeoman and called it quits.

While I was in the reserves, I had to go to reserve meetings during that year before active duty. It was during those meetings that I said I wanted to be a corpsman. And, of course, there was no problem. "We'll send you right out." So I took some tests to see if I qualified and I did. When my orders were finally cut for active duty I went to Hospital Corps School in San Diego. That was in June of '67. It was in Corps School that I started learning more about Vietnam and corpsmen going with the Marines. When you don't know something, you use your imagination. You kind of make a little movie. Well, my movie was if I go with the Marines as a corpsman we'd get to wear the Marine uniform and be an extra special guy. We knew Marines really liked corpsmen, or most of them did. So it was kind of this pumped up feeling. This might be great if we went with the Marines.

It just so happened, as luck would have it, that in '67 they took a whole bunch of corpsmen. We were in these little companies going through corps school. We all had our little number. They took a whole bunch of companies and just more or less stamped them "Fleet Marine Force." They made us an 8404 MOS which meant we were qualified to go with the Marines.

We went for an extra month of training at Camp del Mar which is near

the Marine Corps base at Camp Pendleton. It was a month of what they called Field Medical School. We wore the utilities, not jungle but stateside utilities. We put on all the gear and went on marches. I think one night we slept up in the hills in some foxholes and they had us throw some grenades. But at night we usually came back and went to the beer hall. It didn't seem really scary, although our instructor was a young Marine who had just gotten back from Vietnam. He had some scars on his face where he had been hit by some shrapnel. He was trying to tell us that it was worse than we knew, but how can you tell a bunch of young naive kids. His demeanor was more serious. I remember us being up in the bleachers getting ready to graduate and this one instructor said, "Look, some of you won't be coming back." I know that put kind of a lump in my throat, but it's just like anybody going out driving their car on the freeway and facing the odds of being killed in a wreck. You think, "Not me."

What do you remember about the medical training?

Not a whole lot. It's been a long time. They had us practice taking care of fake plastic wounds. They had us crawl up to them. A lot of the training was just to stop the bleeding. That's about all you could do under those circumstances. So they emphasized a lot how to apply a battle dressing and how to get it tight. If it was a sucking chest wound, make sure you put the plastic that's around the battle dressing on the wound first. They taught us some very basic practical skills. A lot of it was saying "Stay down and apply pressure to the wound." They had put together a little Viet Cong village and they showed us how booby traps were set and what punji sticks were. We threw some live grenades from behind a barrier, you know, pulled the pin and threw 'em. I think they had us fire our .45 pistols. I remember wearing all the gear. They had us piled on with about 40, 50, 60 pounds of gear. They called it "going on a hump." One night we actually played army and stayed overnight up in the hills and dug some foxholes. So they were trying to acclimate us to a degree. I can't really remember whether they fired live ammo over our heads and I don't remember really rugged training like you see in movies, climbing ropes and nets. We did wear the gear and got a feel for how it would be to try and stop the bleeding of a wound while wearing all our gear out in the heat and dirt.

Where did you go from there?

I went to Oakland, California. It was called Oak Knoll Naval Hospital. Ironically, that's where my dad had been stationed after World War II. There I was a ward corpsman for 6 months. I was on what they called sick officers' quarters (SOQ). I think we had maybe 30 beds, mostly taking care of officers that had gone through whatever kind of surgery. It was kind of a post surgery ward. I was about 20 and I met a young Navy lieutenant that had been on a river boat, one of the "brown water boys" and he wasn't much older than me, maybe he was 22. He had taken shrapnel in his head and legs. They had a little metal plate in his head. He was telling me that it was pretty bad over there. Ironically, I ended up going to his house for dinner not long before I went to Vietnam. He had just gotten out of the hospital. At the end of that dinner I remember him real seriously telling me that maybe I should try to get out of going to Vietnam. That kind of perplexed me a little bit. But on the ward, I was like a nurse. I gave shots, started catheters, got out the old razor and gave people pre-op shavings, bedpans, you name it. The only thing the corpsmen really weren't allowed to do was to have access to the strong narcotics. The nurse carried the keys for that. And there was usually one ward nurse on and two corpsmen, except at night when only one corpsmen was on duty. I saw my first body at

corps school wrapped up on a stretcher out in back of the hospital there. At Oak Knoll I saw people dying on the ward, some of cancer. I saw a cancer patient with part of his face eaten away. So I was getting more acclimated to more serious types of injuries and diseases. Working on the ward kind of opened my eyes a bit to suffering and death.

Why did they send you to Oak Knoll after you had become an FMF corpsman? Why weren't you sent directly to Vietnam?

In my case, maybe they knew I had a year and a half or so of active duty left and probably wanted me to get a little more medical training. I had only really gone through corps school which was only 3 months. And that was mainly classes. And then Field Medical School was only a month and didn't involve any real injuries. I guess they knew they had me when they needed me because what they ended up doing was sending me to Nam the last year of my active duty. Basically, I did 6 months of school, 6 months on the ward at Oakland, and almost a year in Vietnam.

So, it was a 2-year commitment then?

Yes, a 2-year active duty commitment.

How did you get to Vietnam?

I was just doing my thing at the hospital and then got word somehow that I had some orders cut and I had to go to this little building. I think I remember just kind of standing outside in a line like at a burger place. And then you walked up to a window and they handed you this packet. And then there it says "Fleet Marine Force, Third Marine Division." So that was the way I got my orders. And then they gave me a month of leave, and then I went to Treasure Island to report back for duty to what I think they called WESTPAC. I was there a couple of weeks. They had actually lost my orders or something so I was there a little longer than usual. And then I was flown out of Travis Air Force Base in northern California.

A few interesting things happened before that. At Treasure Island while I was waiting for my orders to Vietnam, they would line us corpsmen up in the morning for roll call. One of my corpsmen friends who I had gone through corps school with didn't show up. He had snuck out the night before with a Marine who was there at Treasure Island because he had come home on some kind of leave. The Marine was real nervous and hyper. I guess the Marine had told this friend of mine. "You'd better get out of here. It's much worse than you think." I remember thinking how my friend would get in all kinds of trouble. So, slowly things were getting more intense as far as going over to Vietnam.

Anyway, they put a bunch of us on a bus and drove us from Treasure Island to Travis, maybe about an hour north of Treasure Island. From Travis I don't remember a lot. We got on a big commercial jet and flew to one of the Aleutian Islands. It was real bleak and cold. We got out briefly while they were refueling the plane or something.

This was winter, then?

No, it was the end of June of '68. From the Aleutians, we flew to Okinawa where we stayed about a week. And there it was just the opposite of the Aleutians--real hot and humid. I got my real first taste of heat and humidity. We slept in a big barracks there but I don't remember a lot about that. From there we went to Japan where we didn't stay long. And then we flew into Da Nang, where I arrived on the 12th of July.

What do you remember about getting off the plane in that place?

Well, more memories are coming in now. I remember flying in and looking down and seeing all the jungle growth and the runway. When we arrived there was a blast of heat, I mean really hot! I recall waiting for my sea bag and looking over at these guys who were waiting to get on a plane. They were behind a fence. They were all kind of hootin' and hollerin'. I got my bag and stumbled into a hanger. Boy, they were really letting us have it with the old "Here comes the new meat" kind of stuff. Saying things like, "We're going home, you're just arriving. Good luck."

And then I remember being in this big hanger really kind of confused. I didn't know where I was going, what was happening. I was in my Navy blues. I knew I had some utilities from the Field Medical School, but I just remember being sweltering hot. I ran into a Marine who told me a story about getting a testicle shot off and he was going back to his unit. He was probably just "playing with the new guy." The things you remember. I recall seeing some Australians with their hats pinned up on the side. There were a lot of people and I ended up going with a crowd. I went out on the tarmac and there was a big C-130 transport plane with its big ramp down at the tail end. I got on that thing packed in with others like sardines and we flew up to Dong Ha.

I got out at the air strip and then ended up in a tent area. Then I had to wait until the next day to get to my unit. That night I slept in a tent on a cot. And that's when I first heard really loud artillery because it was close. It just blasted me right off my cot. Of course, I was just bewildered. This stuff was so loud and the ground was shaking. One Marine was laying on another cot and without even getting up he said, "Outgoing." I didn't even know what this term meant at the time. That's how green I was. I really knew I was in a different place then.

Had you been assigned to a unit at this point?

No I hadn't. I was just supposed to report to the rear area main tent for corpsmen going to the Third Marine Division. The next morning I went somewhere. I recall someone saying, "Try to become a driver or get with artillery." Someone was telling me that. I went up to some guys behind a desk. I asked them if I could go with artillery. The guy gave me a cynical laugh. "Oh yea, right, artillery." And then he assigned me to "Infantry." Slowly, but surely, things are growing more intense. Well, I ended up getting assigned to a regular infantry unit--the Second Battalion, Ninth Marines.

Was it a regular rifle company?

Yes. Plain old infantry. Finally, I made it to this tented area in Quang Tri. I think I even hitch hiked there and got a ride on a jeep. It wasn't like a lot of fanfare, people picking you up and showing you exactly where you needed to go. I remember this jeep dropping me off and then crossing this open area to get over to the tents. I went by a group of about a half a dozen Marines who were in a tent. I asked how to get to so and so and there were some black guys and a few whites. One of the black guys told me that he was in the rear area because he had gotten a rat bite, and they began laughing. He held up one of these little metal can openers, a P-38 they were called. They had a small sharp hooked point that was used to puncture and open the C-ration cans. They could also inflict a rat tooth looking wound. He said, "Here's how

you get a rat bite. And I'm back here to get 2 weeks of shots." And I didn't even know what they were talking about. Well later I found out that was one way to get out of the field for 2 weeks, a fake rat bite.

This was a form of malingering, then? You'd create a wound with your P-38 and say it was a rat bite.

Right. And then you have to get a series of painful rabies shots, in the abdomen, for 2 weeks and be away from the front. Let me tell you that after awhile I was tempted to give myself rat bites. It was... Oh God! Once you really got into it, it was like, "What can I do to get out?" But I didn't know any of this yet.

So, slowly everything is going against my grain of consciousness or whatever you want to call it. I'm not understanding things too well. I reported to my unit and spent 3 or 4 days in the rear area there.

Who did you report to?

It was a large tent within a tent city. There was a chief hospital corpsman there. And he told me where to sleep and how to get gear. They took us down and had us fire an M16 and the .45 I was issued. That's when I got my jungle utilities, helmet, all that gear. They didn't bother with one of those Unit Ones--a name for a relatively small medical bag. Forget that. They gave me this big ammo bag. The thing must have been about 16 or 18 inches deep. He said, "This is what you're gonna need. Pack this with battle dressings." They gave me the M16 clip bandoliers and I stuffed them with battle dressings. I was given a little box of morphine, some plasma, and bottles of pills--all that stuff.

I remember running into a guy that I had gone to the same high school with. He was a couple of years younger than I was. That seemed odd right there in the middle of Vietnam. I also remember the corpsmen that were coming in out of the field. At that time you were supposed to spend 6 months with an infantry company in the field. If you survived it you could spend 6 months in some other capacity out of the infantry. Some people went with the engineers or to a medical battalion somewhere. I do remember this real skinny, very wide-eyed, hyper guy coming out of the bush. I think he spent 11 months in the field with the grunts and he was real anxious and hyper. It turned out he went back and actually joined the Marines to come back to Vietnam.

There was another guy named Starkey. He came in and he was real quiet. He had also spent quite a few months in the bush. But I just remember these guys coming out of the bush to the rear area and they definitely looked different now. They were all thinner, darker. There was just something about 'em. I recall thinking, "Something is real different here."

Anyway, they assigned me to travel with this Marine who had actually been out in the field for about 6 months and had got caught smoking pot two or three times. They sent him back to Fort Leavenworth prison in the States where he had to do hard time for 6 months. And then they were sending him back into the field in Vietnam to finish up his 7 months. They sent him and me off together to catch a helicopter to the "grunt" company that was out in the field and about to start a search and destroy type operation.

Where were you at this point?

I was in Quang Tri up in the northern I Corps area of Vietnam not far below the DMZ, south of a place called Dong Ha. I think at that time in '68 it was a fairly secure area, but this

area was later hit hard by the 1972 NVA offensive. We weren't in the city. We were out in a rural area in this big tent city. But it was the same thing where they fired the artillery a lot at night. We finally caught this small helicopter and flew out to join my unit. So this kid was starting to make me feel more nervous about the whole affair because he was real anxious about going back to the field. You see, he had already been there and gotten busted. Just talking with him was making the whole thing more serious.

Just before we got to my unit, looking out the door of the helicopter, I could see all these bomb craters. It looked like a moonscape down there. It went from these real green lush trees to all this barren reddish brown dirt and bomb craters. When we landed and I got with my unit, things started getting crazier and crazier. It was a whole different movie or screenplay. The corpsman I was relieving came running up to me. He was filthy, skinny, wide-eyed. I can still see him. He gave me a hug like I was this beautiful blonde babe who had just come into his life. He was happy. Oh God! And then he grabbed his gear and got on that helicopter I had just left and away he went.

That's a quick turnover, right there.

He wasn't wasting any time. And so there I was going "Gee." And the next thing I can consciously remember is this Marine grunt. They're all dirty and skinny and him coming up to me and saying, "Doc. We took up a pool. We've got $500 bucks and we'll give it to you if you kill the captain." Here's my introduction to my Marine unit. So I'm going, "Oh, God!" I knew he wasn't joking. I could tell by just the way he was looking at me. Well, I'm perplexed now. Here I am real inexperienced and probably pale-skinned and a little overweight from my month leave and here are all these guys filthy dirty, skinny.

And there were these jets screaming over and bombing this hill. In my memory it seems like it was only a few hundred yards away. And all these Marines were just cheering like at a football game. I had never seen anything like that in any of my training. These bombs going off, and they were loud. And just seeing the black smoke billowing up into the sky. Little did I know that that's where we were going the next day.

I don't remember anything about my first night. I know I was constipated and homesick but I had never tasted any real fear yet.

How many people were in that unit?

The companies over there were always down. I'd say maybe 80 to 100 guys.

What was the unit designation?

It was Golf Company, Second Battalion, Ninth Marines, Third Marine Division and I was assigned to the Third Platoon. When I was over there I never really knew what a platoon was or a squad, or any of that. As it turns out, a platoon usually ended up being about 30 or 40 guys. There were usually low ranks for various reasons. I think a company at full strength was supposed to have about 50 a platoon. And then you have squads of guys that carry the mortars, and M-60 machine guns. But as far as rifle companies, I think there were supposed to be, with 3 platoons a company, about 150.

Where did you sleep that night?

We had these shelter halves. It was like a poncho and you just grabbed some branches or sticks and kind of made a little tent. And then you just literally laid down on the ground in your clothes. Most guys slept fully dressed, boots and everything. It wasn't raining but it was real

hot, sweltering hot and extremely humid.

Anyway, we were going on a patrol the next morning--my first patrol. I remember getting up that next day real early, about 4 o'clock. Everybody was real quiet and just getting on their gear. I remember this guy real solemnly saying "Okay, Doc, you're going to march behind this guy." And after eating our C-rations, we took off. We just got in a line and went marching off. It was still dark when we started out and it seemed like we walked for hours. It wasn't real jungle here. It was kind of a piedmont area, just before the jungle. It was tall grass and scattered trees. We went to a river and stopped. Our unit had fired some mortars across the river and I remember seeing them explode. I had never seen anything like that before. Someone had mentioned that they had seen some movement. The guys in the company were all agitated. I didn't know when you saw movement that meant there was probably going to be a fight. I know people were real hyper. I remember talking to this guy who was walking behind me--a young red-haired kid. He was nervously going on and on and on trying to figure out how he could get out of the field.

I don't remember a lot about that first day. But that night my platoon was assigned to be the point platoon on the company patrol that was to go back into that area where they had seen the movement. Well, this made the guys in my platoon terribly afraid. I didn't realize this until later but I could just see... The platoon leader--a corporal-- came back and said, "We have lead in the patrol." And everybody was really down. You could cut it with a knife, this kind of terrible sad feeling.

What happened the next day on that patrol?

After another pre-dawn awakening, we marched out in file again. About 9 or 10 in the morning we came to a hill. A few of the guys yelled "Fire in the Hole!" I didn't know what this meant at the time, but I remember seeing these guys around what turned out to be a bunker. And they blew it. There was a loud explosion and black smoke. I can still see that scene.

And then we kept moving slowly up this hill. It wasn't jungle but a hollow reed grass kind of stuff with trees here and there. Then they had everybody halt. I got down on one knee and was just daydreaming about being home or something like that because I was feeling so out of sorts. I don't think I had a bowel movement in almost a week, and I was real fatigued.

Suddenly there were a couple of explosions to the back of me, loud and close. Everyone instantly laid down on the ground. Then all of a sudden all hell broke loose, just a roar of gunfire. It was like the inside of a fireworks factory suddenly going off. And then they started screaming "Corpsman!" I remember this guy laying ahead of me and he was screaming, "Doc, you've got to get up there. But stay down, stay down."

I remember kinda crouching down with all this gear on going up towards the sound where the shooting was getting heavier. And then being screamed at to get down lower. I got into this huge bomb crater about the size of my house. It was probably 10 or 15 feet deep. They were saying, "There's a guy hit down on the side of the hill there." All this stuff was being screamed over the sound of all these explosions and guns going off.

So I crawled over this hillùthe side of the bomb craterùalone, nobody with me and I started crawling down through these little trees. I ended up crawling right through the middle of an NVA toilet. There were these little cans with wire handles and shit in them and there were piles of shit everywhere. I had it all over my shirt front and between my fingers and it stunk badly. Here I am crawling through shit with all this gunfire going on, not knowing what to

expect. Ironically I have to work on an open wound with human feces smeared on me. Not exactly sterile procedure.

I finally got to a Marine crouched down holding a battle dressing on a guy's side. I said, "I'd take care of things. All that Marine did was hold it there. He hadn't put it on. I remember looking at the wound and going, "Oh, my God!" The guy, Murdock, had shrapnel through his flak jacket and shirt and was hit in the upper left part of the back near his chest area. It looked like you could stick two fingers in the hole easily. And all this... it kind of looked like raspberry jello was clumping out of his wound. It was nothing like the fake wounds in Field Medical School. This was the real thing. He was bleeding like a sieve and he was all pale. And all he could do was barely whisper that he couldn't feel his legs.

My field medical training did come in. I remembered the thing about the cellophane. I tried to move him and he was so heavy and I was trying to get that battle dressing around tight enough. All this time I was laying to the right side of him. But things were getting crazier and crazier. The fire was intense and there was smoke and dirt in the air everywhere. Then I noticed that the guy that had been holding the battle dressing when I got there was screaming and bleeding all down his arm. Since he left me, he had gotten hit by a grenade and then crawled back up to me screaming.

By this time, I was going more than half crazy. I remember looking at his wound and just thinking, "This is too much. I'm terribly frightened for myself, but I have to deal with these wounded guys." I yelled at the guy with the arm wound to take care of himself. I knew I had to get Murdock up on his bad side to allow his good lung to help him breathe.

As I was doing that some body came down to help me. I think it was a Marine photographer that was traveling with us, I believe his name was Yaco. I just remember him being there, no helmet or anything, and I was trying to start some blood plasma into Murdock because he had lost a lot of blood. But I couldn't find his veins. They were all so collapsed. I know I was starting to panic by now because it was getting real crazy and all of a sudden the guy who was helping me was gone and I was alone again.

Then I heard a thud and I look over and there was a grenade that had landed near me. It had a black iron head and some kind of hollow wooden handle with whitish smoke coming out. I did what I was trained to do. I lay on top of my patient and the grenade went off. I think it knocked me unconscious for a second or two and the concussion rolled me. When I came to I was terrified. I thought I was wounded because it felt like my legs were numb.

It turned out I wasn't hit but I started screaming. I screamed and screamed and screamed for some help and finally this young black guy named Gipson came sliding down on his rear, no helmet or anything, yelling that he'd help me. He then jumped over on the other side of the wounded Marine. I grabbed Murdock under the arm and I told Gipson that we'd drag him up to the bomb crater. Just then, looking right at the guy to tell him "Let's go," he lurched forward and screamed that he'd been hit.

Then I just went into panic and I think... This is where I'm confused in my mind, maybe I started crawling away. I then got hit in the hip with some shrapnel. I don't remember the explosion but I remember it felt like someone had whacked me with the claw end of a hammer. Looking down, I saw that it had blown a large hole in my jungle utilities and I could see that I had a big hole in me that started to bleed. I was screaming for God to help me. "God, don't let me die." Not that I was that religious a person but I was screaming this out.

I crawled up to this tree and got behind it. My helmet went rolling off and I could look back on the guy who had just come down to help me and he kind of had his arms wrapped

around his chest. He was screaming for me or someone to help him. I screamed back for him to crawl to me and he was looking right at me with his eyes wide open. He said he couldn't crawl. And I was saying, "You're a Marine. Crawl to me." And he was saying, "I can't move."

I knew I had to get out of there, I felt like all hell was breaking loose, and I started crawling up the hill and came to a radioman who was laying on his back talking on the radio. He told me to get back to the bomb crater, so I crawled up and into it. Another corpsman named Deweese came and put a battle dressing on me and it was all mayhem.

Then they pulled the guy I had originally treated and the black guy up into the bomb crater. And then more guys crawled in and were firing out of the bomb crater. I then started taking care of the original guy again, trying to forget my own wound. I recall hearing someone say that the black guy was dying so I shifted my attention to him. This other corpsman and I tried to revive him but he just didn't make it. I saw his pupils go all the way out to the hilt and another thing. His pants had somehow come off. This sounds a little eery but I remember sperm started pouring out of his penis and just running down his leg. There are certain sights you never forget. I just felt terrible. This was the first person I had seen die before me in such a violent way and I will never get that sight out of my mind.

But the firefight went on and there were more people screaming, and more people bleeding. We had to get up and get the wounded into an area for the medevac helicopter. Thank God I was wounded because I got to get on the helicopter also. There must have been a dozen or more wounded and three killed outright. And that was my introduction to Vietnam.

Do you remember what date all this happened?

Yeah. It was July 20, 1968. It's burned into my mind forever.

During this firefight, had you seen any NVA anywhere?

No. I don't remember hardly looking up. When I think about that experience I am mainly seeing the ground. I remember pebbles and the reddish brown earth and these reed type of weeds, and the base of the tree but I don't remember looking up at anything. And as my Vietnam experience went on, all I remember is little quadrants. I don't remember many panoramas.

What ever happened to the wounded patient you had originally started out treating?

As far as I know, he made it. That was another thing unfortunate about being a corpsman in Vietnam. A lot of times you just did not know, and to this day I don't know what happened to people. I'm pretty sure that fellow made it because of all the ironies of life. I worked at Oakland Naval Hospital before I left to go to Vietnam. One of the duties being a corpsman there was to get on this bus. I never did it when I was there but that was one of the duties. You'd go to Travis Air Force Base and pick up wounded and escort them back to the hospital. Unless this is something I've dreamed up since, I could swear that this corpsman I knew actually was on the bus that picked up the same guy, Murdock. As I remember, this friend of mine wrote and told me that he had picked up a patient and said the patient had told him that I had treated him in the field. But to tell you the truth, I don't know if that's something I've added to the story but it seems to me that's what happened 30 years ago. In the book, *The Ten Thousand Day War* one of the chapters begins by quoting this former Marine, Robert Murdock, who was a paraplegic. It seems coincidental.

Just as you're telling me this, I'm looking through the list of names of killed in action who are on the Wall. I'm looking to see if his name is listed. I don't see any Robert Murdock. He's not here, so he's not on the Wall. Well, there you go. He's not on the Wall so he didn't die!

Well, that's good. And as far as I knew, he was alive.

Let's pick up where we left off last interview. How were you evacuated following your wounding?

They brought the wounded up to the top of a hill. I remember crawling around up there and checking on the wounded.

Was this after the firefight was over?

No. It was still going on, believe it or not. They called in jets that were dropping napalm and bombs. The ground shook tremendously and dirt clods were raining down on us. The planes came roaring by extremely close and the napalm made a "wall"of flame. Some guys later said it took the oxygen out of the air and it was hard to breathe, I just remember it was all very close. They had a Huey gun ship firing down into the ravine. Then this big CH-46 helicopter came in and just hovered, lowered the rear ramp, and we corpsmen and some of the Marines literally loaded the bodies on while this thing was hovering. I was one of the last to get on, being the corpsman. The guy then gave me the okay signal. All the while, this machine gunner was firing away out the side of this '46. There were about 14 or 15 of us wounded crowded in there. This gunner was firing away and all these hot shells were flying down onto the floor near me and around us. Anyway, he kept up the fire and they closed up the back of that '46 and it banked on away.

Had you been given any first aid at this point?

Another corpsman came up to me and looked at my wound and then put a battle dressing over the wound. My pants were kinda hanging off me because the shrapnel had also cut my belt in half. I had the battle dressing tied real tightly around my hip.

So that's basically how I got out of there on this big '46 and then they flew us for what must of been about 10 or 15 minutes, which was not fun. I was in hysterics and crowded in with all these freshly wounded traumatized guys. It was very surrealistic and relatively quiet after the shooting stopped. I can't recall a lot of what went on in that helicopter except I still was more or less dealing with Murdock. I was still giving him a lot of attention. I remember that more than anything.

What were you doing for him at that point?

I had him rolled over on his bad side because I was pretty sure that a lung was collapsed. He was losing a lot of blood and I was just trying to keep him awake. I probably had one hand on his pulse.

Were you the only corpsman on that helo?

That's what I'm trying to remember. They must have had a medevac corpsman there but I just can't remember. That's really interesting. I hadn't really thought much about what went on during that ride, except for those shells raining down from that guy firing. I remember me

thinking "Let's get outa here, outa here." I was really afraid the bullets would just come tearing through the skin of that chopper. They were pretty thin when it came to bullets.

Anyway, when they landed us in Dong Ha at the medical center, which was, I think, at that time called Delta Med, and they opened that hatch, there were some corpsmen there to greet us. They started carrying off the worst of the wounded. I kinda got off on my own pretty whoosy and confused. I remember a chaplain handing me a cold Coca Cola.

It was already about 115 degrees out by noon and everybody was heading into this quonset hut. I was ambulatory. The medical facility was in a quonset hut there at Dong Ha. I remember a lot of wounded in there. It was a large place. I was staggering with my pants falling off. I remember walking around holding my pants up because the shrapnel had actually blown my belt in half and I had a battle dressing on with blood running down my leg and I was screaming that this was all insanity. I was missing my helmet. I started screaming that this whole thing was utterly insane. Some corpsmen came running over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, shook me and told me to shut up. This one guy yelled "We've all been through it. Get your act together." I kinda stuffed everything right then. I had a good primal scream going but... I guess you couldn't have this guy screaming away in the middle of these casualties.

So they calmed me down and led me into a little side room where there were saw horses with stretchers on them all in a row right up next to each other. It was like babies at the hospital all lying next to each other in these little cribs. Well, that's where they had us wounded in various degrees of removing shrapnel and bullets.

So, they were doing all this work right there?

Yeah, just in this kind of mass production area. It was out of the main area. I remember when they were leading me to this room, they brought a South Vietnamese soldier by me on a stretcher. I remember looking down and both his legs, just above the ankles were like someone had taken a big axe and had them both nearly cut off; they were just hanging by threads.

Were there any nurses there?

No females as I recall. There were just males. There may have been female nurses, but I don't remember any. A lot of my Vietnam perceptions are real narrow. I just kind of remember my little cot area and them laying me down on my stomach and examining my wound. One guy--a corpsman I think--gave me some shots in the side--lidocaine--because he was going to sew me up. Another guy was standing over me with a clipboard getting the details. Since I was lying on my stomach I looked over next to me, there was another guy named Curley from my platoon and they were taking some shrapnel out of his arm. I remember those forceps being way up inside his bicep and he was screaming to beat the devil. So, it wasn't like it was this nice quiet, clean place with pretty nurses.

They were just running us through like cattle. I'm not saying they were being mean or anything but there were a lot of customers and everything was just matter of fact and no time for warm and fuzzies. It was just business as usual.

After that I was sent back to that rear area where I first checked in with the chief in Quang Tri and there I spent a month recuperating. They had stitched me up with wire sutures because my wound was pretty wide but not real deep. The shrapnel had just taken a chunk of meat out in back of my right iliac. If it had gone further into me it might have gone through my gut, a little more this way it could have severed my spine but the way it hit, it just took a chunk

of meat out of the back of my hip. It just missed the big pelvic bone. I believe my belt helped deflect the shrapnel some.

Then they moved us to a tented area that had a bunch of us "walking wounded." This was up in Dong Ha. They sent a truck called a 6-by and loaded us in the back and took us to the rear area. So much for trauma treatment.

What happened then?

They took us back to that main area in Quang Tri where I had checked in. There must have been six or eight of us that weren't terribly wounded. The rest went on to Japan or back to the states. I ended up spending about a month recuperating. Twice a day my wound was scrubbed, still with stitches in it. One of the worst things happened the night after my wounding. I woke up. I guess I was having a nightmare. I woke up running between these tents. I think I was having a really, really bad dream about the events that had happened that day. Because I had never seen people maimed and killed in front of me. The worst part of all... I know this sounds dramatic... I realized it wasn't a dream. I was really there and in those circumstances and I remember getting scared, really really scared.

Anyway, I spent a month there basically getting my wound cleaned every day. They took the wire out and it kinda opened up real wide. They were going to send me out to the hospital ship for a possible skin graft because it was so wide. But they just left it and the corpsman scrubbed it a couple of times a day and gave me shots of penicillin. During that month back there, there was one time the guy literally had the needle in my ass and we got some incoming. I guess he just yanked it out and ran. Here I'm getting this big, nasty horse shot of penicillin in the butt with my pants down and we got some incoming.

I have to say here and this is for the record. There was a clerk, a corpsman first class, and I can't remember his name, thank goodness. He gave me a really hard time while I was back there recuperating. He called me a malingerer. Here I'm walking around with this painful chunk taken out of my hip and going through these scrubbings every day. And it really burned and hurt because they were trying to scrub the top layer, like the crust of infection. So while I'm fighting this massive infection, this first class is giving me a hard time. I felt pretty perplexed by this. I'm wounded, scared, and traumatized and this nasty individual is giving me a hard time. What's more, this guy, back in the rear, had never seen a firefight in his life. The only thing he was ever recovering from was maybe a hangover or some bad mosquito bites.

I have to say that later when I came home from Vietnam I remember saying, "No, I don't have anything at all against the Vietnamese people, it's just this first class." To this day, I still feel that way.

What was the area like where you did your convalescing?

It was a Marine Corps rear area headquarters. It was a big green canvas tent city. Some had wooden siding with screen windows. I guess you could call it a battalion headquarters. We were right next to Third Battalion, Ninth Marines and First Battalion, Ninth Marines. As I recall, it was the corpsmen section of our battalion, 2/9. It was the Second Battalion of the Ninth Marine Regiment, Third Marine Division.

It was a pretty big military establishment for the Marines. It was outside the city of Quang Tri, in Quang Tri Province, the northernmost province in South Vietnam before you hit the demilitarized zone. As bad as things were in combat, I remember hearing about some disgruntled Marine actually firing his rifle into one of the other battalion's aid station at

corpsman there in the rear. I can't recall if anyone was killed. You never knew when you were safe.

From what you said earlier, your wound was infected.

Yes. It got infected pretty quickly. They gave me penicillin with that horse syringe twice a day. And then once a day, this Betadine scrubbing. Then I wore a big dressing over it. Before it was even healed up, I got orders back to my platoon.

That must have gone over real well.

Oh, God. I'll tell you. I was terrified. I just wanted to go home. I was hurt, scared and lonely and around all these strange people. Getting those wound cleanings. Once again remember, I wasn't in a nice clean shiny white hospital with pretty nurses in their white uniforms. I was in a dirt-floored tent where I climbed up on a stretcher and another corpsman scrubbed me up. I did get to sleep on a cot with a mosquito net covering at night, which was a luxury compared to the field, however.

Another interesting occurance that happened while I was recuperating was a new corpsman arrival from the states was about to be sent to the field for the first time. This poor guy was crying and begging not to be sent out. He was just too scared to go. I remember sympathizing but at the same time thinking why should he get out of going if the rest of us have to go. He was transferred somewhere else and didn't go to the field. Later I wished I had done the same, but there was always the shame factor.

Anyway, I was eventually sent out to the forward area--Vandegrift Combat Base and rejoined my unit. It was just about a month after I was wounded--maybe the 23rd of August. When I got there I regrouped with my unit and I remember getting harassed in the chow tent by some Marines.

What were they doing?

Teasing is kind of the word. They were using dark humor and giving me a hard time about getting wounded. It wasn't like "Welcome back and sorry you were hurt." It was more of making fun of me on some sort of sarcastic level.

Had you known these people before?

No. I had been with the company too short of a time to really get to know anyone. I do remember coming back and going into a tent with a lot of guys from the Third Platoon that were eating together. When I walked in the teasing started. A M-60 machine gunner named Couton got up and bent over holding his side and shuffled around saying snide remarks and was basically mocking my being wounded. This embarrassed me and I've been angry about the teasing for years. And another thing bothered me. They had given me a Bronze Star with a V for valor for action on that day. And I also got harassed about that. In fact, I got harrassed by the guy who was originally holding the battle dressing on that first Marine I had helped. He gave me a hard time. "You got a Bronze Star. I was down there and I didn't get anything," he said.

When did they give you a Bronze Star?

They gave me a Bronze Star right off the bat. I always thought that it was kind of military-political too, because within 4 or 5 days of my being wounded all of a sudden they told

me they were giving me a medal. The Commandant of the Marine Corps was coming to the base to give out medals. I believe it was General Chapman at the time. And they had me put on some fresh new utilities and go up to this little medbase and I was presented with this Bronze Star along with four or five other Marines.

So I got this medal and then got harrassed for it and I felt real strange about it because I had left that guy. It still burns a hole in my soul. So add these complexities to pain and confusion.

Here, you're injured yourself, you're traumatized by what you've seen, you're feeling guilty because you left someone behind, or didn't save somebody you should have... Now they're harassing you. It sounds like you've got all the ingredients of a total wreck.

Amen to that. It was definitely surreal, kind of like Alice going down the rabbit hole. Everything became way too much.

What happened after that?

We were manning lines there at Vandergrift, a.k.a. L.Z. Stud. We got hit that night. Somebody was trying to get through our wire--Viet Cong I guess. There was a lot of firing and red tracers. I pulled out my .45, but luckily I didn't see any enemy. Even being a non-violent type I would have shot someone if I had to. I was shaking so bad I probably couldn't have hit anything anyway!

The next morning, after I'm sure a fretful night, word went around that there was a dead woman in the wires. I was perplexed. I couldn't figure out why there would have been a woman in the attack. I had never heard of that before. Then a few days later, as luck would have it, we were leaving on another fresh operation. I think it was around the 25th of August. Here we go again. We were going into a "hot" L.Z. Anyone who was with the infantry and went by helicopter, that was a group of words you didn't want to hear. A "hot" L.Z. meant enemy contact. I was still dealing with dressing my wound, it was infected and still hurt and here I have to go back out. Talk about scared, that's an understatement.

It was a hot L.Z. and there was some more firefighting which was horrendous. I won't go into all the details but it actually was among the worst of my tour. We ended up fighting on a mountain which took about 3 or so days. On this operation it was first, second, and third platoon in that order up the mountain. I didn't want to go up where 1st platoon was catching hell. I know memories of the previous fight had me terrified and I didn't want to go through that again. I don't know if my confusion about events is part of the numbing they say happened to us over there.

Did you say numbing?

Psychic numbing. We're talking yards here. The first platoon is making contact let's say 50, 80 yards ahead and you're back with second or third platoon down this hill. It wasn't that you felt safe but I was just real happy not to be in the direct fighting even though it's going on just yards ahead of me, and loud and everything else. I guess it's like any war where you get to a place where there's just a little space and if the enemy is not directly on top of you it's not as bad, I guess. I don't know how to say it. It's terrifying but it's a different level.

Nobody was screaming for me to come up this time, plus they were passing the wounded down the line like sacks of bloody oatmeal, if you know what I mean. There were some pretty horribly wounded people. They had encountered these mines in the trees. They were command

detonated. There was an enemy soldier on the other end waiting for the person to get just right and then they set them off. They were actually hanging these mines about 3 feet up off the ground next to a tree so they kind of blasted out there. So our guys were getting hit by these mines and it was really tearing them up. And I was treating them. I remember crawling up and literally rolling with the platoon sergeant under some trees while mortars were going off up above in the trees. Later I was behind a tree when here came a corpsman that I sort of knew from high school (I mentioned earlier) holding a guy who had been shot in the arm. The guy was really screaming. The other corpsman looked at me and said, "I needed you up there. Where were you?" Maybe I've distorted this with time. Strange, I ran into that same guy about 15 years later at a flea market in Marin County and he didn't remember any of it. And I had been feeling bad about it for years.

One of those days, I think the first day's fighting, we were getting mortared and the whole company was retreating at a full run back down the mountain. As I was running, a guy behind me was hit in the temple by a piece of shrapnel. He came running by holding his wound, which was squirting a stream of blood and yelling he was "going home." This was his third time being wounded. I actually grabbed him, as I remember, and swung him to the ground to put a battle-dressing on his head. He was more hysterical with joy about the fact he was getting out of there, than with the head wound.

When did this happen?

In late August of '68, maybe the 27th or 28th of August. We fought our way up this mountain. At one point part way up, in a lull, we stopped to rest and eat some C-rats. The ground had been churned up by bombs or artillery and in the bottom of this shallow crater where I was sitting and eating were these big black flies buzzing around and landing on what appeared to be a small amount of some pulverized guts or body part. I was kind of awe struck, but none of the guys near me seemed to mind, so we just sat there and finished our meals.

Not long after we got to the top a young Marine was shot through the head and his brain was coming out like toothpaste from a small hole in his forehead. He had poked his head into a bunker and an NVA had shot him point-blank. I had to call in a medevac for him. When the chopper was coming down over us, a rotor blade hit a tree and before it could do anything, it took off. I could hear this real high-pitched singing noise. I was also screaming and cussing because I wanted them to get this kid out of there. I later realized that the chopper could have gone down hitting the tree like that. But they did get him out by lowering a basket from another chopper that came in. As they were raising this kid up who had this bullet hole through his head, part of the Stokes litter broke and he swung down with a terrific jerk and now he was hanging vertical instead of horizontal like he should have been. And then they dragged the poor guy through the trees when they took off. Nothing was clean and nice in Vietnam.

I saw my first dead NVA on this operation. The Marines killed them in the bunker that the kid had looked into when he was shot in the head. They blew them to pieces with grenades. One guy was blown in half, with his intestines strewn out and rice and flies everywhere. Another's head was blown apart with his brains clumped out on the ground and an eye hanging out of the socket by the optic nerve. They were a mess and after awhile in the hot sun they began to smell horribly. They were right near where we set up base camp, so I got a work party together and we buried them in shallow graves. Later after it rained one of their hands was sticking up out of the ground in a grasping position. Someone stuck an AK-47 clip in the hand.

I remember seeing it as we left the hill a few days later. Here was this grayish hand

sticking up out of the ground holding this clip, it was sort of a morbid memorial. Anyway, that operation went on for about 40 days.

Were you up there for 40 days?

Yeah, hiking in the mountains and ravines. Years later I found that hill on a map of Vietnam and I have the name of that darn thing somewhere. It turns out it was in a national forest.

Things finally ironed themselves out more or less. It wasn't all fighting all the time. Non-combat things happened too. One night I awoke with a big leech up my nose. I was panicked. Normally you would burn them out by holding a lit cigarette to their body. But as we were near the enemy, I couldn't light a match. I had to pull on the darn thing in the pitch black. Luckily, I did dislodge it. The next morning I had blood all over the front of my shirt as if I'd been hit, from my nose bleeding. Another morning while starting out on a patrol I slipped in the mud and fell and cut my wrist on a jagged snag. So the senior corpsman let me hang back from the patrol. It was like getting a short reprieve.

We did get probed one night and grenades went off and shouting and shooting, that was frightening, but I don't remember anyone getting hurt that time. The NVA also blew a huge cache of ordnance one day that shook the ground violently. It was fairly close to our area and when I saw the huge mushroom cloud looming over the treetops I thought someone had set off a nuclear bomb.

I also saw my first "Bouncing Betty" wound on that operation, where a guy tripped off a hand grenade which was designed to spring up in the air and explode about chest-high. It blew all his clothes off except his flak jacket--everything. His boots! Gone! Of course, he was riddled with holes. Another corpsman and I had to go down a slope to get him. I was scared I was going to set off another one. I recall we put something like 42 battle dressings on this kid; that's the number that has stuck in my mind. I started with his genitals. He also had a compound fracture of one of his legs, the bones were sticking out. As far as I know he made it.

I ended up getting out of the field the day before Thanksgiving in late November '68. I just have spotty memories. Before I did get out of the field, we were manning an artillery base for a while where we got to live in bunkers. In Vietnam, as long as you weren't out on a search and destroy of some kind, everything else kind of felt safe and comfortable.

Relatively speaking.

Yes, relatively. While we were manning these bunkers we had rats about half as long as your arm. They kept getting in the bunkers with us so we set these huge rat traps with peanut butter from our C-rations. Through the night you'd hear these rat traps going ka-thunk and then youÆd hear the rats scratching until their last breath. They were huge. I told you about the rat bite earlier in the interview. The guy held up a can opener and said, "This gets you a couple of weeks out of the field--a rat bite." I learned why the Marines would do anything to get out of the field.

I hate to say it but corpsmen would do anything too! I thought about doing something to get out of the field. It was so tough. It was too much. You might as well put it down for the record. There were people who would shoot themselves in the foot or leg. We had a corpsman who actually injected his knee with lighter fluid and it swelled up like a balloon. I dreamt of... Since I had been hit once, all I needed to do was to get hit by a little piece of shrapnel and I could

get out of the field. Two Purple Hearts, you're out of the field. Three, you go home. I even fantasized that after a firefight or incoming or something of actually cutting a little hole in my arm and putting a piece of shrapnel in there. I'm confessing these sins because I know a lot of people who were in that situation thought the exact same thing and then went on to feel bad about it.

After I got out of the field I became an ambulance driver, temporarily. Then I became a regular BAS. corpsman. I stayed with the Second Battalion, Ninth Marines my whole tour. Some corpsmen, after 6 months in the field, might go to another capacity such as with the engineers or a med battalion.

How long did it take for your wound to completely heal up?

It felt like it took 2 or 3 months to close up completely. It kept getting reinfected and reinfected and it was real wide. It was about 2 inches wide by 4 inches long. A lot of skin was gone. It finally did heal in as one huge scab which later sloughed off and left a big scar. It was right on my belt line. It was my web belt, the one that held up my pants. It had blown that in half; I still have it. I always felt that helped deflect the shrapnel so it didn't go into me as deep as it might have.

You said earlier that you were out in the field about 40 days on one of the operations.

Yes, some horrendous amount of time like that. It was a long operation. I can't recall offhand the name. I remember telling my family when I got back home that I had gone the whole time without a shower or bath. The first one was called Lancaster 2, and the fight was on Hill 174.

You said that when you got back from the second operation you became an ambulance driver.

I got out of the platoon in maybe early November '68. We were on various operations with different names. After I left the platoon, and here was another sticky event, I went with the command group. We were all on the helo pad getting ready to go out on another Op. Of course I was scared as always because you never knew what lay ahead. When a courier came from, I suspect, the med battalion and was naming the corpsmen who were next to get out of the field. The corpsman I had mentioned that was from my same high school, his name was Pelkey, was just ahead of me in time in the field. Well it turns out he decided he wanted to stay with his "boys" in the platoon. That's all I needed to know. I was next in line and I let them know it then and there. I was out of the platoon and put with the command group, CP as it was called. I felt strange for awhile, somewhat like I wasn't being brave like Pelkey, but believe me I was happy to be in a relatively safer position.

I was still out in the field but was with the skipper of the company and his little entourage--his radioman and all the higher ups. I stayed with them for awhile and then got out of the field completely. I had done a lot of patrolling before then--lots of day patrols in the jungle, some night. On one of the night patrols I went through a bush and a swarm of ants went down the back of my shirt, I think they were those red fire ants. Anyway, they were crawling up under my helmet onto my head and down my back and stinging me fiercely. I couldn't holler out because there was enemy about; it was an extremely uncomfortable situation to be in.

Once I got out of the field, I stayed with the battalion, and was assigned to that northern base--Vandegrift Combat Base and became an ambulance driver. I had to go to Quang Tri and drive the ambulance back to Vandegrift. That was quite a ride through "Indian Country" on Highway 1 to Route 9. It was quite a day's ride. I had to fly in on a chopper and get a jeep ambulance and with a corpsman chief petty officer drove back to Vandegrift. I was driving the son of a gun and he was riding shotgun. Sometimes things don't look that bad until you look back on them. "Oh, my God, what did I do?" We could have been hit anywhere along that route.

So, I became an ambulance driver in the forward area. That entailed going and getting injured Marines on base. I had to go get this one guy. He and his friend were playing Russian roulette in the bunkers at night. They jammed a clip up in their .45 and pulled the trigger while holding the pistol to their head. Some stupid game. This kid shot himself through the eye and it came out the back of his head.. I had to go down and pick him up in the ambulance. He was dead and his friend was in hysterics.

The guys would do other foolish things like "hot-box" cigarettes until they had long burning ends, then put their forearms up against each others and drop the red hot cigarette between them and see who could take the pain the longest. A type of macho stress reliever I guess. Another guy had shot himself through the foot. An "accidental discharge!" I suspected he had done it on purpose to stay out of the field, but I wrote it up as an "accident." Various things would happen on the base. We also got incoming occasionally. That was frightening also.

You had a BAS up there?

Yes, a battalion aid station. After my stint as an ambulance driver, I became a regular BAS corpsman. It was for relatively minor stuff and sick call. Guys that were just recuperating from whatever--infections or small wounds of some kind. I did have to spend all night swabbing a patient with alcohol once. He had malaria and a very high temperature.

Compared to what you had been doing, this sounds like a gravy train.

Yeah. It was real good duty compared to the field. Dry tent to sleep and work in, hot food, not "humping" all day looking for trouble. The worst part was the occasional incoming with the rockets and mortars. I think they even had some artillery on us too because we were one of the last outposts before the DMZ. They hit the patient's tent twice, once wounding a guy that was in the tent.

They hit close at other times. The battalion doctor and I were treating a patient when we started getting hit. We had to drop everything and run for cover. Later, I found what appeared to be a significant shrapnel hole in the side of the tent right where I slept. It was nerve-wracking.

Once during an attack a few of us corpsman just got into an underground bunker when I felt the ground shake from an explosion that seemed very nearby. When we got out of the bunker, sure enough, it looked like something had penetrated and exploded underground just a few steps away from the back of our hiding place. During the same attack some guys had been hit while in their tent. When I got there they had already been taken away. But laying on the ground near this hole-riddled tent was a piece of someone's skull with the freshly exposed membranes and blood. A dreadful sight.

One of the wounded was a new corpsman who had just gotten to the base the day before, I think, and hadn't even checked in with the BAS to go out to the field. Later after his recovery I

met him when he did come by to go to the field. He had a lot of small scars scattered on his body. He, like me, had to go out to the bush because the wounds just weren't bad enough to debilitate him. He must of been scared and I could relate to his situation. So that's where I spent my remaining 5 months.

What do you remember about leaving Vietnam? Do you remember the day you left?

Oh God, yes. Ironically, that same corpsman who had picked up the wounded guy in the states that thought he knew me, ended up coming to Vietnam and worked in some division headquarters. I ran into him once and told him if he ever saw my orders for home don't delay and get them to me as soon as possible. I don't know whether he helped get them right to me or not, but I got my orders home at the end of May. Someone brought a little slip of paper to the BAS with my name on it telling me to report to the rear to process out to go home. I had this box of goodies I had been packing up to bring home from Vietnam--a poncho liner and maybe another set of utilities, no real war trophies. So, I got this chit telling me to report to Quang Tri to process out. Man, I just said goodbye to people there around me. I didn't even bother with the box of stuff I'd packed. I left it behind I was in such a hurry.

When I left I got on this "mule," a small, flat-bed vehicle you could put cargo on, and I had someone drive me across this little valley to Charlie Med. I knew there were helicopters going out of there to Quang Tri at times and I wanted to catch a lift on one.

You were still at Vandegrift?

Yes. I spent the rest of my tour at Vandegrift with the battalion at the aid station after getting out of the field. Although I chanced being sent back out to a line company if they became short of corpsman, which almost happened. I never transferred out of 2/9, but thinking back I'm not entirely sure I was given an option.

So I caught a medevac chopper going back to Quang Tri. What a way to leave. Here it had these wounded on it. Charlie Med was like a real emergency station. The really badly wounded would get taken care of there and get stabilized. From there they'd take them to a hospital. There was Charlie Med, also called C-Med at Vandegrift and Delta Med, called D-Med at Dong Ha. I do remember that ride back to Quang Tri. I kept thinking that the chopper might get shot down before I got to Quang Tri. Here I am with these freshly wounded, IVS hanging and all that, and I'm thinking, "Please just make it to safety so I can go home."

I don't remember too much about processing out of Quang Tri. I know I was probably ecstatic. I went from there to Da Nang to catch my big commercial flight home. In Da Nang I ran into a corpsman I had gone through corps school with, a young Texan named Bill Barber. We got to talking. He was up for a Medal of Honor.

Well, he never got it.

No. He ended up getting the Navy Cross instead. He told me about his adventures--harrowing. I also read his write up for the citation. He had crawled out to save, I believe, eight Marines that had been cut down by a machine gun as I remember. He never got hit. Some people had incredible luck. Years later I saw his picture in a military magazine of him being presented the medal.

When I left, I just got on the plane. I felt really good. That darn plane took off and everyone started giving the big cheer. This bothered me for years. I think I began to give the big

cheer but stuffed it because the guy's face appeared--the guy I had left. And I just kind of froze. I just couldn't feel good. I carried that burden for a long time. I had suffered with obsessive compulsive behavior anyway and still do on some level. But I had a real hard time letting go of certain things, like if I felt I did something wrong I really obsessed on it. And that was another unfortunate feature of me going to Vietnam.

I came home and processed out at Treasure Island. Since I was a reserve, I was put into active reserve in June of '69. I remember a couple of other things that bothered me a lot and I might as well confess them on the tape.

There was a young Chicano kid. When I was at the BAS he was to go back to the field after being out for some reason I can't remember. But he was begging me not to send him. And, of course, one of my jobs as a corpsman was to decide who was healed and capable enough to go back to the unit in the field. And he was really
begging me not to send him there.

Anyway, there was another guy, a big tall awkward guy, a Gomer Pyle type. I had cut some warts off of his foot earlier at the aid station. I came back from R & R, of all things, and these guys and some others had gotten hit the night before or early that morning out in the Ashau Valley, a huge operation in '69. And I accompanied the chaplain up to that Charlie Med. And here were those guys in body bags. And when I saw the Chicano kid, God I just... Just a few days earlier he was alive begging me not to send him back to the field. It's one thing to crawl up on a guy in a firefight, but it's another thing to see someone you talked to and felt responsible for their death.

Another thing. I had become very close to this big tall baby-faced Marine. I called him the Moose. He panicked one night while at a listening position and ran back up into the lines and didn't halt when they said halt and they threw grenades and hit him. A corpsman friend
of mine took care of him and said he wouldn't stop screaming and literally pumped the blood right out of his body and he died. The big, ol Moose, Oh, God!

Without getting too morbid here, I came home with some guilt which set in later. I was so ecstatic about being home I put things out of my mind for the time being.

What kind of welcome did you get?

People were glad to see me but it was no big all-night drunk, balloon-poppin' party. It was a quiet home-coming. I came home late at night, alone. I had gotten released from active duty after a short stay back on Treasure Island. I think I took a bus from there, then hitch-hiked part of the way before I got to my house. It was all rather low key.

I arrived home that night to the bad news my mother was sick and in the hospital with cancer, which she eventually died from. They didn't want me to worry about her while I was in Nam, so they never told me while I was over there. It was a real shock to find out that night, to say the least. Later my father and I... I mentioned earlier that my father had been a ship corpsman in World War II. I recall talking to him either that night or a night or two later in the kitchen, real serious like. And I told him about how I left the guy. It really bothered me... It still does. And I remember him telling me "Son, we made a lot of promises to God at the time. If we got out of that mess we were going to do this, that, and other things, which we don't fulfill as we get safe and grow older." Or something to that effect. Even though my dad and I ended up not getting along for years after Vietnam, he told me that thing and it stuck with me. In a way it helped me a little bit.

But, I did go on to have a lot of psychological problems. A lot of the recurring nightmares. Mine never really included a lot of blood and guts. They were mainly symbolic dreams, usually dark in nature. I'd be down in a grave like pit, standing up in it while in this valley and there would be these shadowy dark shapes coming down at me on the sides of the hills. I couldn't really see them well, but I was terrified. I would say over and over how I had already been through this once and couldn't figure how I was back in those circumstances again. I would be extremely anxious both in the dreams and when I woke up. I had those dreams for years. It got to the point where I didn't want to socialize a lot. I had confidence at times and then not much confidence.

Certain sights and sounds would set me off. Blinking plane lights at night were upsetting. The sound of car doors closing in the distance have a similarity to mortars hitting, things like that. I developed some phobias and I was left with a general insecurity about being safe I guess.

And then I went in and out of school using the GI Bill. I went on to get a BA in art and some time later a masters in communications and Information. I ended up working for the state of California. That was my main job for the better part of a decade. I worked as a graphic artist in the Parks and Recreation's sign program. I got to do a little creative artwork. I did a lot of sitting behind a computer.

I've been in some groups. I still go to counseling through the VA. I go once a month, see a counselor, and we talk about mainly life now and what's going on. I even went to a program down in Menlo Park called the "Young Vets Program." That was back in '87. I went through that and it was a lot of that tough love therapy, which was "in" then. I've had my problems with anxiousness and depression. On the whole, I'm doing pretty good now, real good at times. But I still have my ups and downs.

I imagine there would have been a time early on after you came back that this kind of an interview wouldn't have been the coolest thing to do.

Oh, boy, I would have had the shakes. I've talked about it enough over the past few years that it's become easier to do so. I have to tell you that I'm really thankful to you and admire you for getting this historically recorded.

It's important for you and others like you to have the last word. You were called upon to do something pretty horrible to have to do. Every generation has to go through something like this. Our fathers were in World War II, and you had to go through this. Even though I was in then, I was kind of a bystander really. It's important to get this down as you remember it because as time goes on the memories will fade and this era will be forgotten, or if it's not forgotten, there will be a very limited knowledge. You saw it from a corpsman's point of view.

I feel it was the corpsman--the medic-- right out there with the infantry who really looked the dragon in the mouth. They really saw the nastiest part of what the war offered. And of course it's hard to remember and record all the details of my experience, but I feel I covered some important issues. I'm not saying that I went through the worst experience of the Vietnam War. There are those who went through worse and those who went through less. But this is my story.

Epilogue

A year and a half after this interview, thanks to the marvel of the internet, I was able to contact a former Marine buddy, Carl Johnson, through the 2/9 web site. He was a M-60 gunner with the company and was with me the night of the "leech." We could laugh about it now. He was still in touch with Bob Murdock, who had made it and was, as I suspected, paralyzed. I contacted Bob and we talked a long while on the phone. It turns out he was not the guy on the bus, as he was sent to a hospital in southern California from Vietnam. We decided to and did have a reunion at Carl's house in May 2001. Needless to say, it was a real healer and I was able to fill in some details about the fight on Hill 174.

Bob had been through a lot, as you would expect for someone being that traumatically injured at 19 years old. He said getting together had helped him out too, as he stated that he never talked much about his war experiences. It turns out he was the person interviewed in the book I had mentioned and was also Jon Voight's advisor and had a small role in the movie, "Coming Home," which is a story about a paraplegic from the Vietnam War, that was made in 1978. To my surprise, both he and Carl, who was wounded in the arm in that same fight and actually was the guy who carried Bob back up to the bomb crater, said they had thought about me all these years also. Bob said he had wanted to and now did, thank me for helping to save him. Between that and some other issues we discussed, I came away from that meeting feeling much better about my role as their "Doc."

As a side-bar, I met up with Carl again at a reunion for 2/9 in Arlington, VA, in November of the same year. This time Couton came also and I was able to chide him about his giving me a hard time in that tent 33 years earlier. He said he didn't recall it, but I jokingly said, "well, don't let it happen again."

I guess I can honestly say about the only good thing to come out of that experience, besides helping some people and going through an extremely unusual life experience, if you can call that "good," is the unique bond that those of us that went through those trials and tribulations together share with one another. Lasting friendships were forged. Semper Fidelis.